1 Introduction

Orientation

Social geography is approaching an hiatus which demands that its practitioners and students explore the links between the development of theory and empirical research with growing urgency and increasing care. Philosophically, social geographers are being urged to consider a wide range of alternatives to the positivistic assumptions which formerly guided the great majority of geographical research. Theoretical debate frequently appears ungrounded, only tangentially related to the complexities of actual research. Methodologically, too, in the haste to employ a growing range of available techniques and approaches, empirical research has run the risk of being unrelated to an appropriate philosophical context. This series of explorations in social geography is concerned to weigh the implications of a new-found philosophical pluralism and to counter the tendencies of ungrounded theorising and abstract empiricism.

While we accept that the term 'social geography' has sometimes evoked more ambiguity than clarity (Buttimer 1971), we shrink from providing any hard and fast definition of the academic territory occupied by social geography. In a sense, the whole book is intended to structure the search for such a definition, both in terms of substance and method. The book is also intended as an exploration of various avenues for research in social geography, adopting the analogy of the geographer as explorer and extending its meaning in both a metaphorical sense, in our theoretical discussions, and in a more literal sense, as employed in our own research.

Throughout the period of quantification and 'mathematicisation' in the early 1960s, philosophical discussion in social geography was rare and the imperatives issued by logical positivism were scarcely acknowledged. During the 1970s, the myth of geography as 'value-free science' was exploded (Pahl 1967, Harvey 1973, Buttimer 1974) and geographers began to shake themselves free from
the implicit bonds of positivism. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, geographers began to engage more readily in philosophical discourse, exploring in particular a wide variety of "radical" doctrines. Peet (1977), for instance, sought not only for explanations but also for revolutionary change involving "a total attack on the philosophy, social function and practice of geography as it is presently known" (Peet 1977, p. 2). Muir (1978), in contrast, urged that greater attention be given to non-Marxist forms of radical geography, opposing those who argued that a radical geography must be Marxist (Folke 1979). Neil Smith (1979a) introduced aolar discussion of three major post-positivist modes of explanation in geography: logical-linguistics, phenomenology, and Marxism, vigorously asserting the supremacy of the latter. By this time, however, Ley and Samuels (1978) had published this influential text on the prospects and problems of humanistic geography, and Gregory (1978a) had exposed his readers to a broad range of philosophical alternatives elsewhere in the social sciences.

From this basis, it was only to be expected that the recent surge of interest in philosophy, though often pitched at an abstract level, would be marked by a recommittment to the geographies of social well-being. Peet (1977) argued that radical geography was "busy in the quality of life, and, in a more practical vein, D. M. Smith's (1977) attempt to explain spatial variations in social welfare included a theoretical socio-economic dimension which Marxian notions of surplus value. Smith had earlier presented the case for a welfare approach to the whole of human geography by arguing that, even in a welfare state such as Britain, where access to public goods is theoretically equal, "spatial crime and the location of every new service redistributes well-being through proximity" (Smith 1974, p. 294). It is this "liberal" perspective, rather than any more "radical" Marxist one, which has characterized the majority of welfare studies in geography (see, for example, Smith 1973; 1977; Knox 1975, 1982). Social wellbeing is cast in a rather different light by Michael Peter Smith (1980) in his discussion of the philosophical and diagnostic writings of five major theorists of culture and personality (Wirth, Freud, Simmel, Rostak, and Sennecke) which attempt to synthesise a just and viable basis for urban planning. Samuels' (1981) equally egalitarian concerns prompt him to outline an existential geography that focuses on the consequences of choice rather than the mechanics of decision making, and on the assignment and acknowledgement of responsibility rather than on the explicitation of cause. A concern for man, his wellbeing and his status in the world likewise permeates geographical writing on the humanistic philosophies of idealism (Goethe 1974, 1981, Enright 1981), phenomenology (Buttimer 1978, Enright 1976, Levy 1978, Ralph 1976, Tuan 1971), and Marxian humanism (Gregory 1981). Today, then, social geographers are seeking viable philosophical orientations in contexts ranging from rationalism to phenomenology and existentialism, from idealism to realism and materialism; and although in 1977 David Ley could still claim for human geography that "despite a proliferation of empirical studies, there is neither a well-developed body of theory nor explicit discussion of philosophical underpinnings" (Ley 1977, p. 498), the position has rapidly changed. A glance at the contents of such recent collections as those by Gale and Olson (1979), Harvey and Holly (1981) and Stoddart (1981) reveals the extent to which discussion now centres around predominantly philosophical issues. This is undoubtedly a desirable trend: the sign of a healthy, growing discipline. Yet, as Ley (1981a) observes, it has been compressed into a period only one half or one third as long as that which characterised similar developments in the other social sciences, and this surely gives grounds for concern. The break with the past has often been so abrupt that some confusion was probably unavoidable. We have therefore tried in this volume to provide the necessary signposts with which to reorient ourselves in the most fruitful directions. We begin by establishing the vital link between philosophy and methodology before outlining three extreme 'ideal type' perspectives on reaity: those of positivism, humanism, and structuralism. These provide a means of organising our explorations in the chapters which follow. In them, we do not attempt to reach definitive judgments or make a rigorous compartmentalisation of diffuse traditions. We aim merely to lend order to some dynamic schools of thought which currently shelter under the broad umbrellas of social geography.

Philosophy and methodology

Latterly, discussions of philosophy in geography have tended to become one-sided. Analysts are keen to expose concepts and presuppositions associated with the ontological status of their subject matter, but they have been less vociferous with respect to
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corresponding epistemological issues. Already Guehlke (1978) has charged geographers with neglecting those philosophical questions which have empirical research, and many recent innovations remain methodologically weak, outside the positivist trappings of the quantitative revolution.

This volume does not lay claim to any one overriding philosophy, since, whatever its individual practitioners would like to believe, social geography is characterised essentially by its eclecticism. We argue rather, that the fundamental importance of philosophical discussion within any area of the subdiscipline rests on a practical need to state clearly what is believed to exist (ontology) as the necessary basis for formulating an appropriate means of eliciting the character of that which is supposed to exist (epistemology).

Wherever an approach involves an associated battery of methods and techniques does not spring demonstrably from a stated ontology, analysts will be found guilty of the charge brought against Herbert and Johnston (1978), Hay (1979) and Johnston (1980a) by these authors: inappropriate conflation of positivism, humanism, and structuralism:

There appears to be an assumption...that these approaches are in some way alternatives; that we can select this concept from one approach, that method from yet another, and the perspective from another. Unfortunately, this desire for eclecticism rests on the false assumption that these approaches are above all techniques for analysis rather than epistemologies. In other words there is a failure to realise that the three approaches are in fact different philosophical systems, all demanding different methods of validation. (Eples & Lee 1982, p. 117)

Fully agreeing with this statement, we argue that geographers may justifiably and profitably indulge in eclecticism, provided that within any one philosophical framework their subject matter and analytical techniques are logically and consistently articulated.

Bearing in mind this important caveat, we believe that the various perspectives explored by social geographers can all be illustrated with recourse to the philosophical triad (of positivism, humanism, and structuralism) which we take as our major theme. Indeed, most of the literature in this field can be assigned a position relative to these three extremes, which might usefully be conceived of as the vertices of an imperfectly connected triangle. The triad incorporates three implicit tensions: (a) between the assumed objectivity of positivist science and the inherent subjectivity of humanist alternatives; (b) between the 'active' view of human agency implicit in humanism and the 'passive' view of man adopted in structuralist analyses; and (c) between the positivist's interest in empirically observable 'social facts' and the structuralist's belief in their subordination to an underlying explanatory structure. The dimensions of the triad are rarely stable and, in practice, alternative oppositions might be thought at least as appropriate. For example, positivism and Marxism are frequently located at opposite ends of a spectrum which ranges from scientific rationality, objectivity and assumed neutrality about political ends, at one extreme, to a politics of ideology and practice, at the other extreme, which critically rejects the bourgeois ideology of objective rational science, substituting instead a radical commitment to revolutionary social change. We maintain, however, that the triad of positivism, humanism, and structuralism has opened up new possibilities and greater generality. In particular, this framework enables us to treat Marxism not, as it so often appears in the geographical literature, as an undifferentiated and amorphous whole, but as a complex set of ideas spanning the whole spectrum of humanist and structuralist analyses. We begin, though, with a discussion intended to bracket the salient presuppositions of each dimension of our hypothetical triad in turn as a preface to the more detailed scrutiny they receive in subsequent chapters.

Positivism. Auguste Comte was the first philosopher explicitly to claim the title 'positivist'. His notion of "positive thought" asserted that only observable phenomena exist, so that the analyst's task became one of establishing law-like relationships between them by the careful accumulation of factual knowledge.

Coman positivism was soon replaced by the philosophy of logical positivism, emanating from Austria in the 1920s and associated with the 'Vienna circle', a group of German-speaking philosophers whose ideas were rejected by both the Nazi and Communist régimes of the day. Logical positivism was introduced to England by A. J. Ayer, whose commentary Language, truth and logic (1936) remains one of the most accessible introductions to this doctrine. Positivist ideas spread rapidly among social scientists, to whom it offered the prestige of scientific status, the potential for equality (especially in terms of predictive power) with natural
science, and a concreteness, in the ability to validate and verify, which had previously eluded them.

In geography, logical positivism manifested itself as 'spatial science', characterised by the belief that the human use of the Earth's surface

... resulted from the operation of universal processes of decision-making whose characteristics could be identified by a combination of modelling, observation, and statistical analysis of the outcomes of these decisions. Successful identification of these processes may lead to the development of geographical laws in which a prime component would be the element of space, since sensible decision-making involves the efficient use of resources, such as the time and costs involved in traversing space. (Johnston 1980a, p. 402).

Johnston describes this route to explanation in terms of his perspective of 'naive realism' which shares some common assumptions with positivism. These include a conception of science as objective rational enquiry seeking knowledge of an external reality; and the formulation of theories capable of objective assessment by reference to empirical evidence which exists independently of the suppositions of the observer. Although the terms realism and positivism are often used interchangeably, Kast and Urry (1975, pp. 9-40) draw an important distinction between them. Whereas positivist explanations are couched primarily in terms of the regular causal connections linking observable social phenomena, this does not satisfy the demands of realism.

For the realist, adequate causal explanations require the discovery both of regular relations between phenomena, and of some kind of mechanism that links them. So, in explaining any particular phenomenon, we [the realist] must not only make reference to those events which initiate the process of change; we must also give a description of that process itself. (Kast & Urry 1975, p. 30)

Those versions of realism which share with positivism the assumption that reality is present in appearance also share its position at one extreme of our hypothetical philosophical triad. Their mark is imprinted in many spheres of social geography, most explicitly in the 'social physics' approach which attempts to apply the principles of Newton's gravity model to human migration. A somewhat different notion of social physics has been derived from Simmel by way of Park and the dissemblarist school of spatial sociology (Peach 1978). Here, Simmel's vision of men as atoms interacting in social space fuels the argument that physical separation is a good index of social distance, such that measurements of the former may be substituted for an appreciation of the latter.

The tenor of many factorial ecologies, which summarise small-area urban data using factor analysis and principal components analysis, is no less positivist. These techniques were often taken up with uncritical enthusiasm during the 1960s. For many analysts, regularities amongst descriptive correlations between spatially coincident variables gave sufficient grounds to impute causality and prompt broad generalisations. 'Laws' were constructed to account for the spatial characteristics of social structure. Some perception studies, too, despite their allegiance to behavioural geography, remain positivistic. Attempts to recover people's 'space preferences', to elicit mental maps and to measure cognitive distance, remain committed to prediction and statistical explanation. Objective reality may have been eclipsed by its 'subjective' equivalent, but both are treated as tangible phenomena, available and undisputed for the analyst to scrutinise, measure, verify and use as a basis for generalisation. As Ley observes

The cognitive-behavioural approach was subsumed by spatial analysis as 'an appendage' to the location school. Within this conceptualisation, the full force of the scientific method was applied. For example, a preoccupation with measurement, operational definitions and a highly formalised methodology. Subjectivity, in short, was to be confined within the straitjacket of logical positivism. (Ley 1981a, p. 21)

Essentially, then, positivism, and some versions of realism, are characterised by a belief that reality is present in appearances, that objects exist independently of observers, that they may be measured repeatedly to form the basis of laws which can be verified with recourse to empirical fact. This philosophy was tacitly assumed by a majority of geographers during the early 1960s. Today all its presuppositions are questioned by one or other of the two remaining perspectives: humanism and structuralism.

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Humanism. In rejecting positivist philosophies as inappropriate for a geography of man, Ley (1980a) accuses the geographical adherents of positivism of making a series of avoidable errors. In denying or suppressing the subjective aspects of human experience, Ley directs an epistemological error which glosses over the subjectivity of the dweller who makes this claim. Similarly, any 'geography without man' (positivist or otherwise) commits a theoretical error in devaluing the power of human consciousness and human action to redact the course of events. The creative power of human intentionality is central to the humanistic vision of reality. This reduction of man's centrality in human geography can also be regarded as an existential error, providing questions of meaning and interpretation with purely technical answers. Finally, Ley suggests that geographers are in danger of committing a moral error by reducing human beings to the status of passive creatures, mere puppets in the models of state theorists and social engineers whose policy recommendations carry sufficient power to render their erroneous presuppositions self-fulfilling.

To date, three humanist philosophies have received most attention in the geographical literature: existentialism, phenomenology, and idealism. The merits of pragmatism are yet little explored, and Marxism humanism might be accorded a niche of its own elsewhere between the extremes of voluntaristic humanism and structural determinism. The humanist philosophies accord man a central and active role in the world—a principle which directly opposes them both to positivist 'spatial science' and to structural Marxism.

In the case of humanism, Gregory (1981) argues that just as possibility can be opposed to environmental determinism, so humanism can be opposed to a geometric determinism wherein

Men and women are made to respond passively to the dictates of an underlying and universal spatial metric and an overarching and abstract spatial logic. (Gregory, 1981, p. 3)

The nature of this opposition is most apparent from Mills' (1962a) laud account of the philosophy of Giambattista Vico. He describes this as 'positivism reversed', since Vico held that while men could truly know their own world—social reality—they could not know the natural (God-given) world. Thus, whereas

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...the classical positivist thesis is that all knowledge should approximate to knowledge in the natural sciences, Vico's argument is not merely for the autonomy of our social understanding but for its epistemological superiority, and that because its subject matter is genuinely our own creation. (Mills, 1962b, p. 3)

The opposition of humanism to structural Marxism is summed up by Duncan and Ley (1962) who suggest that, as an holistic school of thought, structural Marxism must adopt a passive view of human beings. An exclusive use of a priori theoretical categories effectively reduces man to an object, relations between people become relationships between things; individuals are totally manipulable; and it is the overarching system (for many purposes irreducible) which provides individuals with their definitions of situations, their purposes and their bases for interaction.

Humanism adopts quite the opposite tenets. Man is the determining factor, and society, in all its complexity, is the dependent product of human interaction. It follows from this that for the humanist (unlike the scientific positivist or structuralist) it is important to draw a distinction between the social and natural sciences. In the study of social phenomena, reality does not exist independently of the observer or the observed. It is a social production, whose meaning arises out of the behaviours people direct towards it. Consequently, explanations of society rest at least in part on the experiential strategies required to understand shared meanings and so comprehend the behaviours and attitudes they engender. Methodologically, this requires a move from the principles of statistical inference based on representative random samples, to those of 'logic inference', based on unique or idiosyncratic case studies (see Mitchell, 1983, Smith 1981a, 1983). The method commonly adopted is known as verstehen, a form of empathetic understanding gained from the adoption of the subject's own perspective. It is not a purely subjectivist approach, however, as such complete intuitive understanding is rarely possible and even less readily demonstrable. The method of verstehen must therefore attempt to go beyond intuition and empathy towards a more constructive role of interpretation. The humanistic endeavour can therefore be described as a process involving the contextual interpretation of subjectively meaning social action. In this, the humanist has moved a considerable distance away from the model
of explanation implicit in scientific rationality. It is this methodological leap from empirical to hermeneutic analysis, from quantitative to interpretative social science, which those steeped in the legacy of positivism find most difficult to accept. In this reluctance, they share the sentiments of structural Marxism.

Structuralism Of the many versions of structuralism contained in the history of Western thought, the third element of the philosophical triad introduced earlier may be taken as that called 'realist, structuralism', to adopt the terminology of Keat and Urry (1975). This label distinguishes the most recent structuralist movement from earlier forms of 'positivist' and 'instrumentalist' structuralism. According to this 'realist' view:

...a structure consists of the system of relations which underlie and account for the sets of observable social relations and patterns of social consciousness. (Keat & Urry 1975, p. 12)

This 'realist' version of structuralism provides an excellent illustration of the uneasy polarities in our philosophical triad. We have already alluded to the affinities between positivism and realism, and we are now suggesting an affinity between realism and structuralism. This is so because the variant of structuralism which we describe as 'structural Marxism' shares with positivism at least two fundamental presuppositions.

First, they agree that reality exists independently of the observer. They disagree, however, on the question of whether reality is present in a space of abstract or concrete social theoretical categories refer to hidden realities, not to the observable phenomena of positivist analyses. The two perspectives thus differ in the status they accord empirical data. For the structuralist, observable phenomena are merely an outcome of the workings of hidden political, social and economic forces. Surface appearances may be used to illustrate a point, but they cannot explain, or even verify, an account of how these deep structures operate. Positivism makes use of observable empirical facts to formulate and validate laws. The goal of prediction is superseded in structural analysis by the dialectic. Dialectical method rejects the static compartmentalisation required by Aristotelian logic, focusing rather on the process transforming one element into another in a society characterised by endless conflict and change. Secondly, both positivism and structuralism bear the stamp of naturalism: they recognise no distinction between natural and social science. Structuralism, however, unlike positivism, insists on penetrating beneath given surface appearances to the structures which determine people's thoughts, subjective meanings, and actions.

The move from humanism to structuralism is therefore marked by a change in the status of human beings: from 'man as subject' to 'man as object', from a determining to a determined existence. The history of social thought is characterised by deep concern and bitter division over this irreolvable distinction. The dualism has been variously conceptualised as the tension between atomism and holism, as a choice between organicistic and mechanistic interpretations of society, as a methodological distinction between interpreting social action and analysing social systems. But these differences are not merely the academic reflection of intellectual pedantry. They carry important ethical and moral implications which go some way towards explaining why the dialogue between opponents is often so antagonistic.

The extent to which human beings are treated as the puppets of deep structural constraints determines the assignment of responsibility, the exercise of free will, and the possibility of judgment. To imply freedom or lack of freedom for people in the course of academic analysis is to describe the possibilities for praise and blame, emancipation and manipulation. The problem facing contemporary social geography is one of specifying a reasonable and just position between explanations of social life based on the voluntaristic actions of individuals, and explanations which must limit, even determine, these actions. It is a question of finding a tenable middle ground between complete voluntarism and absolute determinism, and it is a challenge which must be met by the geographer if he or she is to seek for any measure of social relevance. This book attempts to spell out some of the options, and to consider the relevance of these fine philosophical distinctions for the practice of contemporary social geography.

Exploring social geography Having established the philosophical triad of positivism, humanism, and structuralism as an appropriate organisational basis for the discussion of contemporary social geography, it remains to outline